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A Period Drama

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Two naked, sweaty, bearded men and an open fire

Andrew Sneddon

This paper addresses the representation of friendship in a scene from Ken Russell's film *Women in Love*, starring Oliver Reed, Alan Bates, Glenda Jackson, and Jennie Linden. The film continues to generate much controversy and discussion among those who have studied both film and book over many years. The film of 1969 is an adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's eponymous novel of 1920, which also courted much publicity over its sexual subject matter at the time. In 1921 W. Charles Pilley, writing in the weekly periodical, *John Bull*, said of it: 'I do not claim to be a literary critic, but I know dirt when I smell it, and here is dirt in heaps – festering, putrid heaps which smell to high Heaven'.¹

At the time of its release, the film was seen as 'racy' and attracted attention from the Film Censors. One scene in particular courts much debate, a scene supposedly filmed on location at Bretton Hall, the Grand Hall designed in part by the Victorian architect George Basevi (1794–1845), which quietly nestles in what are now the grounds of Yorkshire Sculpture Park. As artist in residence at YSP in the summer of 2008 I was enthusiastically informed, with certitude, that the famous wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates was filmed on the site, while being directed to a marble fireplace, called the Basevi Fireplace. After watching the film and studying the infamous scene it was clear that unfortunately the location of the filming was wrongly attributed. It had been believed to be the location for over forty years. The scene's surrounding rich gold-leaf detail and architecture is in the Victorian Gothic Revival style while in comparison the architectural details of Bretton Hall are clearly more subdued and restrained.

The reception of the scene's new provenance was met first by disbelief and then with much disappointment by staff and researchers at YSP. The strong reaction to this news prompted me to question why this scene should be so important and why the representation and display of friendship between two naked bearded men should be so uncomfortable and confrontational. The reception of me as artist in residence and 'messenger' of bad news disturbed the hospitality and dynamic of the relationship between host and guest in the normal friendship of an artist-in-residency.

This paper sets out to reflect upon the re-discovering of *Women in Love*, the power of place-making (true or false), and the making of a response to context and situation. It is also my intention to share the discoveries, reasoning, and resolutions of a response to the residency experience.

My initial aspiration for the eight-week residency in the summer of 2008 was to make reference to the relation of the contemporary settings of the grounds with the historical context of the Estate and rolling countryside. The opportunity of time and space to think about this context was a huge benefit as ideas came and went but what stayed constant was the desire to respond in some way to the immediate environment. A belief in John Latham's idea, indeed his mantra, that 'context is half the work', was a difficult proposition to ignore, particularly in the realms of a residency.²

The residency came shortly after I had completed a co-authored book with Kiyoshi Okutsu and Gavin Morrison, in which we consider Chikamatsu Monazaemon's (1653–1724) remark that 'art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal'.³ Chikamatsu Monazaemon was referring to the need for eminent Kabuki actors to imitate real characters in favor of fictitious characters. The book borrows Chikamatsu's statement in order to explore the connection between the representation of raw nature or wilderness and that of idealised nature or nature improved. The additional context of the residency taking place during the exhibition of the work by Isamu Noguchi made the opportunity more relevant. There seemed a strong link between some of the sources, references, and ideas generated by the book and the context of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the Bretton Estate.

As I walked around the grounds with people who had an intimate knowledge of the estate, the clues and markers of the estate's archeology and history became visible and the trained eyes of those around me identified elements that I had overlooked or misunderstood. I was interested in producing a response which would appear initially incongruous to its setting but which might, through its lifetime, become adopted by its context. This new insight into the history of the place

became key in providing a site specific and poetic response to the residency. My ideas have been heavily influenced by recent research on the nature of place and how artists are influenced by place and how in turn this influence manifests itself in art practices that are created through a response to particular locations. An early and important reference for me of how location and place can influence ideas and production decisions was seeing the early black and white photographs with text by Willie Doherty from the late 1980s. The stark, gritty greyness and dividing compositions of these works provided the viewer with a window into the geopolitical situation affecting Derry in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

Walking the Estate and making notes and sketches informed my early understanding of the landscape. This was further developed through discussions with the Estate's in-house archivist, Leonard Bartle, and by researching material generously provided by him. This was followed up by access to Bretton Hall. On entering the Wentworth Room on the ground floor I was informed of its role as the backdrop to scenes from the film adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. The famous wrestling scene with Oliver Reed and Alan Bates in front of a roaring fire was supposedly filmed in this room. A small printed notice next to the left-hand side of the Basevi fireplace confirms this. Through further research this iconic scene was discovered to have been filmed on location at Elvaston Castle near Derby, not Bretton Hall.

This mistaken identification sparked my interest in how a place can encapsulate memories. I am reminded of James Joyce's note in the margins of his manuscript of *Ulysses*: 'Places remember events'.⁴ I have often wondered how this act of transference of memory from spaces to individual works, how buildings, rooms, spaces absorb events into their very fabric only to release a sense of these events at a later date. The observation made by Joyce has always seemed to me to be true as certain places can resonate feelings of past occupations or actions. I suppose we only need to think of the ghost story set in an old haunted house to understand Joyce's thinking. But how can a memory of a non-existent event be felt by so many for so long without being discovered to be a falsehood?

Many may not be familiar with the entire film, which surrounds the intimate and emotional relationship between four main characters: two sisters, Gudrun and Ursula Brangwen, played by Glenda Jackson and Jennie Linden respectively, Gerald Crich, played by Oliver Reed, and Alan Bates as Rupert Birkin. However, many seem aware of the naked wrestling scene between Oliver Reed and Alan Bates. Both book and film are widely regarded as addressing the dynamics of personal relationships and the development of difficult and at times destructive friendships; they also address social relationships, sexual tension, and the intrigue of a stifling Edwardian society. Both D. H. Lawrence and Ken Russell seem to be actively probing and testing the boundaries and value systems of the 1920s and late 1960s, which are explored in the constantly altering relationship between characters and is also articulated between differing gendered roles in society at these times.

The backdrop of roaring fire and flickering light combined with clever editing would appear to owe much to the scene's success in seeping into our psyche or memory banks. The cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey writes:

Place, in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct. This is the baseline proposition from which I start. The only interesting question that can then be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?⁵

With a preliminary idea in mind, that of a connection to a place through a mistaken social construct I began to study this particular scene from the film, considering possible sites where I might screen the film or re-edits from it, or a variety of still images incorporating the real site and the alleged site. This was fascinating and brought up new approaches and possibilities for considering a response to place and a possible outcome to the residency.

After carefully studying the scene in some depth, identifying the different camera angles, audience view-points, and editing sequences in relation to the audio track and dialogue, I was attracted to the first section where the two actors are wrestling in front of the fire. I believed by identifying this selection I was respecting the original stimuli of the fireplace that became important in identifying the correct location. The scene chosen has the fireplace in a central position. I had

decided to edit out all other camera shots but to retain the audio track, which is predominantly huffing, puffing, and groaning with no dialogue. When the screen had no image visible the sound was still present. There were only five or six scenes lasting three or four seconds each with the remaining sequence reduced to black.

In closely studying the entire scene I became conscious of feeling uncomfortable watching two naked men wrestling in front of an open fire. This led me to question why I, like so many other viewers, should feel so uncomfortable. Why, oh why, is this scene more complex than one simply portraying platonic friendship between two men? Could it be because the scene really depicts Rupert's frustrated attempt to make love to Gerald? Or is it something to do with Russell's fascination and taste for depicting the darkness of sexual power throughout the film. *Women in Love* was not only the first feature film to show full-frontal male nudity but it also depicted two naked men engaged in an act that is deeply homoerotic and also unsettlingly aggressive. It may seem tame by today's standards but considered shocking forty years ago.

Thankfully, we are helped to understand the scene's powerful impact by Joseph Lanza in *Phallic Frenzy*.⁶ Lanza suggests it is all about penises and how terrifying they can be. He recalls two traumatic episodes from Russell's early childhood, experienced whilst watching fairly innocent films, as the original stimuli for the highly suggestive wrestling scene. The first occurred when he was watching *The Secret of the Loch*, a very British film from the 1930s. Russell recalls a scene with primitive special effects featuring a plucked chicken attempting to suggest the Loch Ness Monster (the plucked chicken turns out to be an iguana). Apparently the young Ken Russell took one look at this terrifying creature's jutting head with its dangling, testicular neck skin and bolted out of the theatre.⁷ The second relates to an encounter while watching Walt Disney's *Pinocchio* at the cinema where he was aroused by 'watching Pinocchio's stiff little pointed nose grow and grow',⁸ which was accompanied by being groped by the shadowy figure sitting next to him, and again a terrified young Russell fled from the cinema. Whether or not we choose to believe these stories it might account for Russell's clear intention to unsettle the viewer by combining contrasting sensations of danger and guilty enjoyment.

For me, however, in watching the film repeatedly and as a whole, it seems that more importantly it is about relationships and the complexity of friendship. In an interview about the film from 1971 Alan Bates says:

I think people are immediately drawn to try and understand themselves through the sensual. He seems to be able to touch on things that most people are perhaps obsessed with, or at least concerned with. And those fundamental basic relationships are explored through the film and in Lawrence's writing between men and women, between women and women, and between men and men: he understands them all.⁹

After a period of reflection I refocused my attention on the second section of the scene in which the two principal male actors are engaged in a close embrace that in many ways can make the viewer even more uncomfortable. This allowed the focus to move away from the fireplace as being the central motif in the thinking behind the re-edit and to concentrate more directly on any possible link with an audience. There was a distinct voyeuristic feeling while studying the footage; this can be further demonstrated in an anecdote. While studying the scene at home, timing and making notes on the editing, I was oblivious to my thirteen-year old son looking over my shoulder. He innocently asked 'What you doing?', saw what was on screen and shouted to his mother 'Dad's watching naked men', at which point I could feel the colour drain from my face and began to struggle to construct a defence.

The final edit is a repeated and looped section of the scene with an out of sync sequence of audio track. If the piece were to be revisited a number of times by a viewer, s/he would probably revisit a different visual with a different accompanying audio track. By singling out the particular section the final edit now allows for a monocular vision of the work to be experienced by the audience that strengthens and refers to a subjective voyeuristic experience.

In order to capture the uneasiness and the voyeuristic aspects of the scene I felt that the display of the re-edited sequence should be carefully considered in both contexts of the film and the Estate. The intention would be to use a storage cupboard in the Camellia House. The installation of the

audio/visual piece inside a cupboard would allow the work to be experienced hearing it first and then by tracking the sound back to the door. Hopefully, upon reaching the door viewers will be inquisitive enough to peer through the existing hole for the absent handle, thus adopting a Peeping Tom stance and effectively embracing the voyeuristic monocular viewpoint. The stance and audience participation envisioned would be similar to Duchamp's permanent installation from 1969 of *Etant Donnés* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in which the audience/spectators are encouraged to peer through a hole in a door through into a strangely sensual world that has attracted a variety of diverse scholarly activity.

Residencies and commissions can be incredibly influential for artists and while they may often provide eureka-type moments, they are seldom without strings attached. They are contractual between host institution or organisation and individual or group; sometimes the contract is formally written down and signed or it may simply be a tacit understanding between both parties. There is, however, a common agreement that the invited guest's role in this contract is to deliver and the host's role is to facilitate, and neither can uphold their part of the bargain without the assistance of the other. In this relationship built over a period of time there can be new discoveries, tensions, meeting of minds, or realisations for further research or projects. Within the given time period there may be repeated site visits, research into the particularities of the given site or the organisation's daily operations, observations of audiences and their behavior but it is likely that any project generated will have an engagement with the site in a variety of ways and on many levels.

The residency at YSP followed a conventional path that involved research and experiments through a series of trials and errors. Much of the research borrowed methods not unfamiliar to the realms of geography, anthropology or cultural studies by way of fieldwork or interview. On reflection, this methodology or a variation of it of borrowing from other disciplines in a pseudo-scientific fashion is a common practice adopted by artists and accepted by host organisations. As Miwon Kwon suggests, that this approach can 'easily become extensions of the museum's own self-promotional apparatus, while the artist becomes a commodity with a special purchase on "criticality"'.¹⁰ Artists can sometimes find themselves in a tricky position between honoring a contract and working with an organisation. As Isabelle Graw notes, 'the result can be an absurd situation in which the commissioning institution (the museum or gallery) turns to an artist as a person who has the legitimacy to point out the contradictions and irregularities of which they disapprove'.¹¹

Locations or sites referred to in cinema and television can have a notable impact on popularity and tourism, and can generate significant revenue. For example, *The Duchess*, filmed on location at Chatsworth House and Kedleston Hall in 2008, or *The Da Vinci Code*, from 2006, featuring Rosslyn Chapel, have brought great financial revenue to the local communities through increased tourism, to name only a couple. These locations and many others have seen an increase in tourism and have added to a growing industry, particularly popular for foreign tourists and tour operators catering to the 'tea and wee' sector.

I have attempted to explore and share the thinking behind the response to an artist in residence opportunity and the journey of response in connection to a particular context and situation. The serendipitous discovery of the mistaken provenance of the naked wrestling scene from *Women in Love* and my attempt to represent the scene in an unfamiliar manner behind a closed door endeavored to convey the strangely uncomfortable but nevertheless compelling attraction to an iconic piece of British film-making was not intended to spoil a myth but set out to explore the idea that place is a social construct.¹² The hospitality extended to me during the short residency was greatly appreciated and my response was an attempt to celebrate the importance of friendship and the complex and often conflicting challenges between guest and host. I am reminded of the saying 'never let the truth get in the way of a good story.'

NOTES

1. R.P. Draper, *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge, 1970, p. 14.
2. John Albert Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p. 54.
3. Gavin Morrison, Kiyoshi Okutsu, Andrew Sneddon, *The Slender Margin between the Real and the Unreal*, London: Artwords Press, 2004.
4. Tacita Dean, Jeremy Millar, *Artworks: Place*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, p. 14.
5. John Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, and Lisa Tickner, *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 5.
6. Joseph Lanza, *Phallic Frenzy: Ken Russell and his films*, Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2007.
7. Lanza, *Phallic Frenzy*, p. 1.
8. Lanza, *Phallic Frenzy*, p.1.
9. From *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, interview date: November, 1995 © Brian McFarlane, 1997 <<http://alanbates.com/abarchive/film/wil.html>>
10. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004, p. 47.
11. Isabelle Graw, 'Field-Work', *Flash Art*, November/December 1990, p. 137.
12. John Bird *et al*, *Mapping the Futures*, p. 5.

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